

We All Have the Same Moon

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with author Richard Ho. Richard Ho studied English and literature in college, worked as a magazine journalist and eventually became a script writer and editor for an educational website. As he describes it, at some point the thought of writing children's books popped into his head, and he hasn't been able to shake it loose since. His books include *Red Rover: Curiosity on Mars* and *The Lost Package* among others. And he has earned numerous awards, including Kirkus Reviews Best Picture book of 2021 for the *Lost Package* and the National Jewish Book Award for his 2023 book, *Two New Years*, the subject of our discussion today. Richard Ho, thank you for joining us on the College Comments Podcast.

Richard Ho: Thank you so much for having me.

JH: *Two New Years* is really delightful. It describes the augmented joy and meaningfulness of a bicultural family that celebrates not one year, but as the title indicates, two, Rosh Hashanah and the Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival.

JH: Your book remarks on the beauty of both the differences and the similarities between these two festivals. And one similarity that caught my eye is the notion of new beginnings and promise. What's the language, the idiom, the vocabulary of promise in each culture?

RH: It's an excellent question. I think largely when I was setting out to write this book, really the impetus for it was the fact that I have kids now who are growing up with this blend of two cultures. And whereas myself, I'm a convert to Judaism, so I grew up Chinese, and then as an adult, I chose to convert to Judaism. And so I took on all of these practices and beliefs in addition to my Chinese upbringing. And so I had to do a very conscious synthesis of the two cultures. As far as like the different beliefs and the different customs and rituals with my kids, however, I'm watching them grow up and celebrating these holidays with this dual perspective. And for them, there's no like separation there. It's all sort of this unified blend, which I found really beautiful and I wanted to capture the magic of that in a picture book.

RH: And I think when I was starting to come up with different ideas for how to show those parallels, the original ambition for this was to do all of like the lifecycle events and all the holidays throughout a year. And then I quickly realized that that was way too ambitious. That would've been encyclopedic rather than a picture book. And so I narrowed the focus down to New Year because that's something that's universal across cultures. Every culture has their way of welcoming the new cycle of time. And to me, a lot of the similarities, not just with Chinese New Year and Rosh Hashanah, but like all the New Years that I looked at and sort of studied for, for reference had this idea of promise and renewal as you were embarking on a new year. And so for specifically with Rosh Hashanah and lunar New Year or Chinese New Year, we use Lunar New Year because it's something that's celebrated across almost all Asian cultures, not just Chinese.

RH: So I grew up calling it Chinese New Year, but really Lunar New Year is more inclusive and expansive. So we use that for the book. But I think the language that is used is also very similar. Like with Rashana, like a lot of the greetings are about like Shanah Tovah, right? So like a good new year. And then with the lunar year, Gung hay fat choy, which doesn't really have an exact translation that I can point to. I am fluent in Cantonese, but I wouldn't say I'm super comfortable going to Hong Kong and speaking, so you'll have to take my translations with a grain of salt. But a lot of it is about like congratulations and good wishes and luck for the new year. So there's a lot of overlap there with the various ways that you greet people on the new year for both.

JH: Another similarity that you point out both with your illustrator and with your words is special foods. So I'm gonna ask you a really hard question here. What Jewish foods do you love and which do you hate? And which Chinese foods do you love? And which Chinese foods do you hate for the New Year?

RH: I was dreading this question both on the Chinese side and the Jewish side. I will never say what I hate. I can't do that. There are obviously foods that I love for both sides. And as one of the great joys of this book was watching Lynn Scofield, the illustrator, watching her sketches come to life as far as like the different foods. And there's so much of the culture on both sides is bound up in the food. So I would say on the Chinese side, I grew up with the sort of standard Chinese fair. There was always roast duck and chicken and a lot of the staples of Chinese cuisine are things that I can't eat anymore because now I keep kosher. So I don't eat pork, I don't eat shellfish and seafood and shrimp and things like that.

RH: So those things are no longer part of my diet. But, I do have fond memories of eating all of those things growing up, and I do miss them quite a bit. On the Jewish side, I think for Rosh Hashanah specifically, and this is also one of the things that I really wanted to center on for the parallels for this book. This idea of Simanim, which means signs in Hebrew and these are the symbolic foods that were eaten during the first meal of Rosh Hashanah. So things like tipping apple and honey and pomegranates and all these other things that whether by their name or their characteristics, they sort of convey this idea of good fortune or good deeds or promise and renewal going into the new year, honey being sweet and wishing everybody a sweet new year. So these are things that I fell in love with quickly when I was studying for conversion. And even

though the specifics were different than what I grew up with in the Chinese culture, the sort of underlying theme and message behind them was very familiar because you saw similar things on the Chinese side as well.

JH: I will say for Simanim, the fish head or the fish is one of them.

RH: Yes.

JH: And I notice you didn't go there, so I know this is a friendly conversation and I'm enjoying getting to know you, but I have to push on the foods you hate. I'm giving you, on the record, I'm giving you an opportunity to say that you don't love gefilte fish unless you do.

RH: I actually love gefilte fish.

JH: Oh, okay. [laughter]

RH: It's too generalized. There are types of gefilte fish. You start to get into this sort of division between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic traditions. And for me, as I was studying for conversion and like becoming Jewish myself, most of the people that I associated with are on the Ashkenazi side. However, there are a couple of Sephardic families that I became friends with and I was just struck by how different their cuisine is. And so things like fish are very different, depending on which family you choose to eat at. So for me, gefilte fish was always something that, it was very different than what I grew up with. I know most Jews who are born Jewish, it's part of their upbringing and they have very visceral reactions to it one way or the other. For me, it was just sort of like a new thing and I've always been very open about food. I've always loved trying different types of foods and so yeah, I personally am for gefilte fish.

RH: Now the fish head for Rosh Hashanah was interesting for me because largely that was symbolic and not so much something to be actually eaten. There are people that actually do eat the fish head, but for us, we never really did. Although apparently there is a part of the fish head, like the cheek meat is...

JH: Cheek. Yeah, the cheek is particularly, the cheek is very tender. Yeah, yeah.

RH: Exactly right. But we go into this in the back matter of Two New Years because there just isn't room in the main narrative to go into the details for all of these things. The illustrations show a lot, but then the visual glossary at the end was a chance for us to really dive into the specifics of a lot of the things that we're showing in the illustration. So we get into things like fish head and the idea that fish is central to both Chinese and Jewish cuisine for very similar reasons, being like a symbol of abundance and good fortune and expansive families and things like that. But the idea that in Chinese culture, you generally have a whole fish to represent like the whole year and like unity, but you only eat from the middle of it because you wanna leave the head and the tail. That's sort of a wish that we complete what we started.

RH: Whereas on the Jewish side, there's a verse from the Torah that says the Jews should be a head and not a tail. So we have the fish head as the symbol that we use for Rosh Hashanah and the rest of the fish can be eaten. So like really very similar things, but like slightly different depending on the culture.

JH: Alright, well, you've revealed yourself not only to be an author, but also a very discerning palette. So keep that in mind.

RH: I like to eat.

JH: Food that puts you in good company then. [laughter] So in your author's note, going to the back matter to which you referred a minute ago, you point out that both the Chinese and the Jewish calendars are lunisolar, meaning their annual cycles take into account both the cycles of the moon and those of the sun. What's so significant about the way we peg our cultural lives to the rhythms of the celestial bodies?

RH: I think so many cultures really center on the movement of the earth around the sun or the phases of the moon. These are all things that are very universal to the human experience. They're part of the natural rhythms of life, not just the human life, but like time and the seasons and all of these things are very important to a lot of these holidays. You find with both Chinese and Jewish culture, this idea of the season being very important, spring being a season of renewal on the Chinese side and fall being like agriculturally a time for planting and a time for new beginnings. So these are things that resonated on both sides for me, but also the idea that so many cultures today are based on the Gregorian calendar, which is the standard, January to December, and that's a solar calendar that's based on the 365 degree cycle of the Earth's orbit around the sun.

RH: But you've got these two ancient cultures, Chinese culture and Jewish culture that very specifically also incorporated the lunar cycle, the phases of the moon for the months. And that to me was just one of many, many things that I discovered along my journey of converting to Judaism, the parallels between the two cultures and these two ways of life and belief systems that I was integrating within myself. Like I just kept finding these really comforting points of commonality. And, so this lunisolar calendar to me was just another one of these things where it's like, well, there clearly is something here beyond just my interest in both of these.

RH: If you get even more granular, this idea that there's like a leap month every couple of years there was a big difference between the Chinese calendar and the Jewish calendar, and that in the Chinese calendar, the month that gets doubled up. And this is to account for the fact that the phases of the moon for the month, if you add those up over the course of the year, there is a slight discrepancy between that and the 365 day orbit. So to account for that extra, I think it's like a third of a day or something like that. I'm not an astronomer, I'm not a scientist, so I don't know exactly, but there is a bit of a difference there that I need to account for. And they do that by having a month get doubled every couple of years.

RH: In the Jewish calendar, that month is always adar, the month of adar is the one that gets doubled, so that stays the same, but in the Chinese calendar, the month that gets doubled rotates throughout the entire calendar. So at any given time, you might have two birthdays in a specific year. If it happens to be your birth month, that was the one that gets doubled. So that was always fascinating to me.

JH: That's cool.

RH: Again, these are things that are... They're very similar, but also there is very slight different nuances that distinguish them, but to me, it just makes it more rich and more fascinating to explore both sides.

JH: Insofar as the book itself makes a point of discussing similarities and differences as a source of celebration and joy, I actually noticed that you chose not to include either a simplified lunar calendar or a more complicated lunisolar calendar in the body of the text itself, as among the sources of similarity. Was that a conscious choice? Did you have to wrestle with that because it was complicated or was it obvious to you not to include it?

RH: I think there were a lot of things that we had to not include, and that was one that I knew from the outset was probably gonna be too complicated to include. And I do remember seeing the initial sketches when I saw that Lynn had taken the part of the Chinese zodiac with the animals motif and then like blended that with the Jewish side having like the very Jewish months named, in the semicircle. I thought that was brilliant because it's not exactly a calendar, but it gets across the idea of the annual cycle. And it also hints at the Chinese zodiac, which we don't get into at all, but like the different animals there. Actually I have another book that goes way more into that, but there's so much that we had to unfortunately leave on, the cutting room floor because there's just within the parameters of a picture book, you're limited.

RH: One other thing that somebody pointed out to me fairly early on was we don't actually talk about any of the greetings. We mentioned at beginning of the conversation about the different ways that you say Happy New Year in both cultures. That note doesn't appear anywhere in the book, even in the back matter. And that's one of those omissions that I wish that there was room for that, but there was just so much that we wanted to cram in that something had to be left out.

JH: You speak of the antiquity of both Judaism and Chinese culture. If I may, on a personal note, when you began to learn about and ultimately to embrace Judaism, was the sheer fact of the depth of memory and consciousness that both cultures share in and of itself a source of comfort and attraction too?

RH: Absolutely. I think the idea that in Judaism has been around for thousands of years, and not only that, but unlike a lot of other ancient cultures and civilizations, you find that the core tenets and the customs and a lot of the day-to-day details are the same now as they were back then. So you don't have this morphing or modernization of a lot of cultures that you find throughout history. And so the authenticity and the truths behind Judaism have always been there and they've always been constant. And that to me was just fascinating and so impressive because

you don't see that anywhere else. Like even within Chinese culture, there's been so many different phases of different dynasties and practices and philosophies that have come down through the ages.

RH: And with Judaism, the prayer service of, you walk into any synagogue, whether it's orthodox or conservative or reform, and a lot of those prayers would be very familiar to somebody who lived 3000 years ago in Israel. So like that level of continuity was just something that was extremely rare in my view and something worth looking into for sure.

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JH: You make a point of sharing in the book flaps and in your author's note, not only your bicultural identity as both Chinese and Jewish, but also the fact that your personal story inspired and informs the book. In the course of the many interviews I've had, I've noticed that there are two types of authors. There are those who background their personal stories and there are those who foreground them, and you clearly fall into the latter category. So tell me a little bit about the pros and cons from an author's perspective of choosing to foreground your story.

RH: There's probably not one approach that defines my own career. I would say this book specifically is certainly more of a foreground example, but even here, I would say it's not an exact representation of my family. So you have a little bit more leeway to play around with things and to have some creative liberty. I would say most authors have something of themselves in every piece of work that they create. It could be less or more depending on what that project is, as an example, so the family in *Two New Years*, it's very standard nuclear family, mother, father, daughter, son. My own family, we have four boys. So very different as far as like the makeup of the family. But part of our intention with making this a fairly universal type of book is we wanted it to appeal to not just Chinese families or Jewish families, or even not just Chinese Jewish families.

RH: I think the idea that anybody that comes from a family with some sort of mix of backgrounds would see this book and find something within it that resonates. And this idea that we're taking two different cultures and putting 'em together and there's no contradiction there, everything is, it just fits together seamlessly because that's how your family is. So we wanted to make sure that we were as representative as possible and open as possible to being a mirror or a window for as many readers as possible. So for me, it wasn't necessarily a conscious choice to make this like entirely about me or not. But just like creatively over the course of making the book, the natural dynamic of working on a picture book is the author writes the manuscript and then the illustrator comes in and brings their own vision to it.

RH: And for most cases, the author and the illustrator don't have any direct contact. So I didn't meet Lynn until well after the illustrations were completed for this book. So there is no

opportunity for like collaboration in the traditional sense, to arrive at a shared vision. It's really taking a written story and then putting a completely new spin on it through the illustrations.

RH: And to me, that's always been the most thrilling part of being a picture book author and not an author illustrator, is that I get to see somebody else elevate my words in ways that I never could have imagined. And I've been really fortunate and blessed in my career that the illustrators I've worked with have been, without exception, amazing and have brought such unexpected new, delightful things into the stories that I've written. And that's fantastic and I love that.

RH: But I do remember early on, the initial sketches that we saw, the family wasn't an Orthodox family in those sketches. And I talked to my editor because my family is Orthodox, so I wasn't sure if I wanted to request more like of an authentic orthodox representation in the story, because on the one hand it would've been nice to sort of have as much authenticity of my own family as possible. But on the other hand, I also wanna make sure that this book is accessible to everybody. And so I went back and forth on this and the editor was the one who encouraged me, if you want this to be a reflection of your family, you should ask for that. And so I did. And Lynn was incredibly open to that and did so much research to get the details right. And the authenticity ended up being one of the most amazing things because I had so many Orthodox readers contact me after the fact and say it meant so much for them to see that sort of representation, which is so rare in children's lives.

RH: Jewish representation in general is not where it needs to be as far as children literature, but like within that, Orthodox Jewish representation is even less there. So that to me was an amazing thing that we were able to sort of like fill a little bit of a niche there.

JH: Yeah, I noticed it. And it is effective. I wanna revert to another theme that is historically minded, which is a particular, and I think inspiring historical and cultural parallel between Chinese and Jewish civilizations. And what I'm thinking of is the phenomenon of diaspora, of being both home and away from home.

RH: Yes.

JH: I wonder just as a person engaged in the world and as a fellow Jew, did that particular similarity resonate with you as you got to know Judaism and then ultimately to join the Jewish people?

RH: It did. It was an interesting thing for me because I was born in the US, my parents grew up in Hong Kong and they immigrated here in the late '70s, and my sister and I were both born in the US. So to me, I was born in the Chinese diaspora and I never really had that much connection to a land of my origin. So whether that be Hong Kong, which is where my father's from, or mainland China, where my mother was from originally. So beyond just visiting a couple of times as a kid, I never really had much of a connection to that part of the world.

RH: So I never had this yearning for like going home because to me, home was here, the diaspora was my home. When I started learning more about Judaism, I found that was one of the big differences between Judaism and a lot of other cultures is there's a very strong sense that this is a diaspora, this is a temporary place. It's not where we want to be. And that to me, it's stronger for Jews than it is for other peoples who are living outside of their cultural or ethnic homes.

RH: And that was an interesting thing to see because if you don't grow up in this sort of world, you don't really have that initial understanding of what it means to have an ancestral homeland that you instinctively love and wanna return to, even if you've never been there before, subsequent to converting. I have been to Israel twice and it's been an incredible experience for me to sort of see firsthand what that means, to have a home in one place, but also live somewhere else. And this duality of yes, we are living here, but there's also this idea that in a ideal future world, we will be living there. And to me, it's something that had to be learned because it's not something that I grew up with in any sort of meaningful way with my Chinese upbringing.

JH: In your author's note, you very touchingly describe the experience of being Chinese and Jewish as fundamentally compatible. You write both can and should coexist. I wanna acknowledge and appreciate that spirit, but I also want to bracket it for the sake of this question and ask you, if I may, aside from the sort of relatively obvious choices of diet, for example, what are the choices and frankly the sacrifices you've had to make in pursuit of a bicultural identity for yourself, but also a bicultural family?

RH: I think one of the things that I've always felt very fortunate about is that my parents, were so open to the idea of their child going off and adopting a completely new lifestyle. And, I think it came with a lot of tangible consequences for them. So for one, like the diet thing, the fact that just like Jewish mothers, Chinese mothers delight in cooking for their kids. And so once I became completely kosher, that wasn't possible anymore except for situations in which, for example, if she came into my home and used my cookware and ingredients and things like that. But outside of that, like for the most part, like I wouldn't be able to go to their home and eat their food. And I think that was a... The thing that made me the most nervous is whether they would view that as an implicit rejection of them.

RH: And thankfully, they took it very well. And even if they didn't understand exactly why I was doing this, they understood that this was important to me and it was part of the culture and they were able to set that boundary and really embrace it. And I really am so grateful that they were able to do that because that made the whole process possible really. I don't know if I could have gone through with this type of life change without the support of my family I'm Sabbath as of right now, so like the idea that I can't go to family events that are scheduled for Saturdays, that is something that also was a point of contention with some extended family, not necessarily my immediate family, my parents and my sister, but other people that I grew up with that couldn't understand why I couldn't go to, whatever event because it was scheduled on Saturday.

RH: So those were like things that have come up over the course of years. I converted back in 2007, so it's been coming up on almost 20 years now that I've been Jewish. And like these things have always been points of contention with people that are from my previous life and aren't as open or understanding of the choices that I've made. So there's always gonna be things like that, but I have found a lot of comfort in the fact that the truly, truly close people in my life have always been very, very welcoming about it.

JH: That's lovely. Close us out, if you would, with something that surprised you in writing this book.

RH: The surprising part I think was just the sheer number of families that really connect with this, not necessarily because of a cultural connection. There certainly have been far more Chinese Jewish families reaching out to me than I thought existed. But like, I knew they were out there, but I didn't realize to this extent. So that has been a surprise. I was invited to speak at the Jewish Book Festival at Vancouver, and one of the reasons they invited me was because there was a very big overlap in Vancouver of the Chinese and Jewish communities and the Talmud Torah school that I spoke in, as part of the student body, they had Chinese Jewish students. And that to me was fascinating. And I love to see that, this idea that my little story here is not unique necessarily. It's not even that rare.

RH: So that to me has been a surprise, but a good one. But I think in general, you never know how a book is gonna be received, but it's been so overwhelmingly positive. I think that's one of the things that I take a lot of pleasure in, is that people are now able to give a book to their kids that directly reflects their experience. And that is such a powerful thing for... Myself growing up, I never had the wealth of options available to me as far as Chinese representation in children's books, let alone Chinese-Jewish or Jewish. So it's, I think that to me just makes me want to do more and more to sort of fill out that part of the library that is still not full enough yet.

JH: Well, count me among those who felt touched and delighted by your book. And thank you for taking the time to share it with us.

RH: Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect.

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